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ABSTRACT

Recent research has focused on the faulty implications emitted by factual television accounts of real events, while television news has been described as a pseudo-reality created from the ongoing flow of events. Furthermore, the convenient metaphorical language of television news often creates images of reality in such a way that the reality and the description are indistinguishable. More research should focus on short and long term implications of a steady diet of television on viewers and investigate factors concerning media literacy. As more specialized cable networks become available, the language of the medium--which changes in response to technological advances--will be altered to emphasize areas of interest to a select audience rather than a mass conglomerate. Research methodologies must evolve in conjunction with changes in the medium's language. Thirty footnotes and a bibliography are appended. (SRT)

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# Non-Fiction Television: Not a Replication of Reality

by

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Non-Fiction Television: Not a Replication of Reality

Much research has been conducted on the implications of television upon society since its pervasive evolution in the 1950's. Inquiry has focused on violence[1], role models[2], aggresive behavior[3], and the very language of the visual medium (including; film, video, and television).[4] While some scholars have focused their attention on fictive works, more research is being conducted on the relationship between factual television and real world happenings.

Pseudo-reality:

Political scientists Nimmo and Combs describe television news as a "dramatic pseudo-reality created from the ongoing flow of events."[5] Actual events are condensed into a common melodramatic format. The presentation of the actual events takes the form of the ancient storyteller, i. e. in the quest for objectivity, a measure of subjectivity cannot be overcome. As an example, Nimmo and Combs followed the three networks' coverage of Three Mile Island between March 28 and April 9, 1982.[6] The study involved taping all three newscasts, quantifying the amount of time on the story, and the number of stories per newscast on TMI. The implications were that ABC depicted the accident in a sensationalistic tone, CBS's coverage was one of reassurance, while NBC's view was rather undirected in approach.

Some implications acquired through the medium are achieved via the language of shot composition, graphics, editing, and various other electronic techniques.[7] Such aesthetic judgments as the amount of time to devote to a sound bite (portion of an interview) from a newsmaker, greatly influences audience perception. The director-editor-cameraperson has extensive control over focusing receiver attention where s/he desires because no alternatives exist.[8]

Congress complains of unfair treatment:

United States Senators William S. Cohen (R-Maine) and Gary Hart (D-Colorado) allege that network news offers the public only cursory coverage of what actually occurs in the capital.[9] A debate extending hours in duration may be edited down to a ten second sound clip. The preponderance of subject matter is completely dismissed. The media literate members of the general populace however, consume the information as being the total account of the reported event.

This dependency to obtain information shapes the perspective of those who acquire familiarity with the given medium. This media grammar creates a commonality of understanding.[10] When a person becomes adept at one medium s/he will continue to maintain that perspective in spite of technological advances.

Factors affecting audience perception:

In addition to perspective, a myriad of phenomena within the audience members as individual viewers bears

upon the interpretation of the message.

The amount of importance a news item is given can be traced to factors of education and subject matter familiarity in viewers.[11] College educated viewers who are exposed to print media demonstrate a greater interest in subject matter of television newscasts than other audience members.

A possible reason for this is that younger college educated persons are more television literate than the previous generation who is more radio literate, thus comprehension is enhanced. An analogy could be drawn between a person learning to use a word processor who had previously worked with a typewriter. Regardless of technological improvements, the word processor is utilized as a typewriter.

People give different reasons for viewing or not viewing television news. Wenner outlined six general categories for viewer interest in political reporting: avoidance, conversation, para-social guidance, issue guidance, entertainment, and selectivity.[12]

Those individuals under category one, "avoidance", expressed a lack of interest in politics and indicated a preference for entertainment. Generally there was a high degree of political cynicism among the persons contained in this group.

Those in category two, "conversation", identified strongly with a party and tended to be younger in age. The third group, "para-social guidance", expressed an extreme interest in politics and tended to be involved

in face-to-face exchanges on political issues. The fourth classification, "issue guidance", indicated a comparatively high educational level and advanced age. Having little noticeable political cynicism, they viewed television news for issue guidance.

The fifth group, "entertainment", revealed a high level of political cynicism and viewed the coverage as they would a comedic presentation. "Selectivity", the sixth category, was highly partisan, involved actively in politics and leaned toward a candidate already.

Wenner suggests chronic "know-nothings" will offer any excuse for avoiding political television viewing, sometimes unable to ascertain why themselves. Such lack of interest is perhaps attributable to the fact that those persons could not see a correlation between events in the news and their lives.

Some such chronic "know-nothings" can be found among university communication students according to a study published by Selnow and Riley.[13] Slides were shown to the students of prominent United States politicians, actors, foreign political leaders, sports heroes, and entertainers, which the students were asked to identify. The results were less than impressive, with students misidentifying many of the figures. The findings revealed that newspaper readers performed better than those exposed exclusively to other media. One explanation could be that reading requires greater involvement than television. While viewing television a person may engage in sundry other activities, while newspaper reading demands complete attention. Radio, being

an aural medium, is not given to the visual identification test.

Media differences:

A television viewer has the option of selecting his/her degree of involvement. If a person perceives a program of personal significance appear on the screen, the viewer can direct his/her hearing and seeing senses to focus on the subject intently. On the other hand, if the viewer has a passive interest in the televised material, full hearing can be directed at the audio portion of the presentation and occasional glazes as desired. A third option is at the viewer's discretion in that the television can be turned on to avoid loneliness, regardless of the subject matter as the medium gives the impression of other persons being present.

The latter two options exist for radio listeners, while the newspaper/magazine reader has only the choice of full attention or nothing. This is true even in glancing through the printed pages or looking only a photographs. For the time the person is looking at the book or magazine his/her attention is exclusively on that subject. Unlike radio listening or television viewing, one cannot read while performing another task.

Thus the interest of the audience in the subject matter has a direct bearing on the rate of retention and level of perception whether full or partial. In news the greater the audience perceives the subject matter will

affect them, the higher the level of interest will be.

Presidential debate:

This is demonstrated empirically in research conducted by Lichtenstein at the University of New Mexico.[14] Viewers of both presidential and local political debates were asked which was: 1.) more interesting, 2.) more informative, and 3.) more influential. Participants selected the presidential debates as being both 1.) more interesting and 3.) more influential, thus a correlation between interest and influence.

Lichtenstein's research purports that presidential debates are not as important as popular belief would indicate. This is because the debates do not indicate anything. There is no measurable way for determining the winner of a presidential debate.

Political analyst Jeff Greenfield points out that not even instant telephone polls immediately succeeding a debate are of value because they only gauge the enthusiasm of partisans who are willing to spend the fifty cents to place the call.[15]

The use of metaphors:

Mumby and Spitzack posit that television's incessant use of metaphors frames the context in which the content is perceived.[16] That is to say that what television does is present a fragment of reality, but due to the nature of the medium, it is not possible to seperate reality

from the description of reality. An analogy is drawn between television news and looking through a window. A window allows a very limited perspective to be ascertained by those peering through, just as television permits a narrow look at events of reality in the world.

This video language reconstitutes the world for the television audience.[17] Because all television is a form of entertainment, reality must be packaged in the manner most pleasing to the eye. If a conflict arises between accuracy and descriptive succinctness, often the latter takes precedence. In other words, it is program continuity that is all important, i. e. presenting as much material as possible is secondary to having a smoothly flowing presentation that will hold audience attention throughout the duration of the alloted time for a particular newscast. It is easier to refer to the "right wing" and "conservatives" than to explain in detail the complexities of the issues in a given discussion.

Acronyms and abbreviated labels are other elements of news language that create misconceptions among viewers. The selection of such terms as "prolife" over "anti-abortion" and "patriotic" over "melodramatic" portrays a more positive image of a given group. The group (reality) remains the same, only the image created by the media has changed. Thus reality and the reconstruction of reality are seperate entities.

Television's language:

The medium's language carries implications in other regards as well. When an anchorperson insists,

"We'll have a full report on that story...", the implication is that the viewer will be told all that could possibly be related on the given topic, not merely a perspective or series of perspectives. In reality any televised presentation is a cursory treatment regardless of the time allocated simply due to the "window" perspective phenomenon.

The example that is common in such a discussion is that of a phenomenon witnessed by ten different persons which would consequently produce ten different eye witness accounts. The same applies to this medium with persons working therein. Five reporters with five camerapersons would each see different levels of significance in a given assignment. For this reason, any newscast presents a subjective view of a newsworthy event by a reporter who can, at best, only aim for as much objectivity as possible. Such aiming is the mark of professionalism in the ranks of television journalism.

The convenient metaphorical language of the medium often creates images so intertwined with reality that the two are indiscernable apart from each other. In the Mumby-Spitzack analysis, a study of the medium's metaphors measured reality perception.[18]

<u>An empirical look at television's language:</u>

In the study three categories were established; 1.) Politics is war, 2.) Politics is a game, and 3.) Politics is a drama. Section one measured the use of

such metaphors as, "a prime target", "leader of the opposition", "defeated", and "victory". Section two metaphors included; "had won", "first", and "second rate players", and "the strategy". The third section included; "little suspense", "anti-climax", and "well-orchestrated". The researchers found that category one (Politics is war) was predominate, followed by two (Politics is a game) and three (Politics is a drama) respectively.

The implication is that the metaphor is perceived to be just as valid, i. e. just as real as the event being described. Thus the imagination of the reporter in creatively painting an easily understood impression is altering the actual occurence in the mind of the audience.

Reality verses aesthetics:

Taken to the extreme a case in point could be an assignment editor makes a decision to give an assignment to a reporter and photographer who perceive the event as "dull". To bring back a better story (more visually interesting), short fragments of the meeting are edited juxtaposed with the most controversial elements of the lengthy mundance ordeal presented in a fashion that indicates a controversy of greater magnitude than was actually the case. Here a senario is created for the sake of filling time on a newscast with "hard news", that could be prolonged as long as the reporter continued to seek reactions on the comments from all parties concerned. Thus a three hour meeting could be

overlooked for the most part simply because aesthetically a mediated occurence was more appealing in terms of maintaining audience interest.

Former White House Chief of Staff, Deputy National Security Advisor, and Commander of NATO, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. alleges that news management has now become a strategic part of planning on the part of government leaders. [19] The medium which began as an experimental novelty has evolved to the stage in its development that federal policies are sometimes initiated, based on television's depiction of world events.

Haig poignately sites specific instances where television diverted attention away from the issue originally being covered to the personality conflicts in the periphery.

One such situation involved a disagreement over resolving the Lebanese crisis. Haig's proposal, differing from Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's, did not receive as much coverage on network television as the "personality conflict" between the two individuals. Thus for convenience's sake it was more simplistic to highlight personality squabbles than address complex issues.

Diplomacy in the balance:

In addressing the problem of the medium's language, i. e. format of television news, editing

procedures, camera angles, et al, Haig suggests that flippant answers designed to fill a newscast often create disagreements. Rather than calling for government reforms to deal with such problems in a legislative way, Haig implies that the public will ultimately demand more from the medium. As an example he sites numerous lawsuits brought against broadcast news organizations in recent times.

He attributes much of the problematic nature of television's handling of diplomatic relations to be due to the fact it remains in an immature stage of development as a medium itself.

As a medium of information dissipation, television, in its quest for large audiences often hires reporters for evanescent, decorative traits rather than more enduring analytical abilities.

Haig's appraisal of the infantile stage of the medium can be carried further. A comparison with the various print media demonstrates just how young television is. While the printing press has existed for centuries as the primary source of information heretofore, television has but a few decades been fashioning opinions.

Prior to the time of the printing press, most information was spread orally. Television and radio are two media given to oral communication. As will we demonstrated later in this paper, television popularity does not mean the end of either print journalism nor the use of radio. Although television has changed audience expectations of the other media, they continue

to serve a prime function in the information age.

At this period of media development, economic factors are by far the significant elements in determining what is televised. The cycle begins with the viewer. As measured by the national ratings services, a newscast has more value (that is, it can charge more for its advertising), the more viewers it has.

As television already intrinsically possesses a "show business" quality, the attempt to attract and maintain large audiences is of more importance than presenting events as close to actual occurence as possible.

Mechanical considerations:

Electronic devices further serve to remove the televised event from what actually took place (reality) to what is aesthetically appealing. The storytelling function supercedes the presentation of real people doing real things.

The emphasis is on building an audience, not on replicating reality. Economic considerations set the parameters in that, networks must answer to their stockholders. A network newscast losing ratings points on a regular basis will not remain on the air in its present form. Either replacements will be hired for the present staff or profits will steadily dwindle to the chagrin of corporation vice presidents and executives.

Cyclical nature of television:

So the cycle ends with the same public with which it began. Television news does not present an attempt to merely replicate reality because an insufficient number of viewers or potential viewers would watch. Much of this is attributable to time constraints. Very few audience members have time to watch all the ramifications and subtle nuances emanating from a three or four hour congressional deliberation. Since most of them have a limited, if not passive, interest in some of the issues being debated, they simply want to know basically what transpired rather than a complete account of the event in its entirety. This is where television assumes its storytelling function.

The cyclical nature of broadcasting is intertwined with economical considerations. The more entertaining a newscast is, the more viewers it will attract. The more viewers a program has, the more advertising it can command. Thus, large audience numbers and high advertising rates makes for a contented group of decision makers (i. e. chairman of the board, stockholders, et al).

Electronic gadgetry has made television's role of "the storyteller" more convenient. Rather than travel to the town square and hear a rendering of tales from nearby and distant locales, one flip of the switch provides a cursory view of non-fictive events all over the world, complete with action packed color

photographs and condensed simplistic narration.

Evolutionary considerations:

This short attention span was a creation of the medium. Shots of considerable duration in television and films of the early fifties are unacceptable to the audiences of the eighties, hence, the language of the medium has evolved in conjunction with technological advances.

This evolutionary process continued to change the expectations of the audience not only on the medium undergoing the technological changes (television), but accompanying media (radio, magazines, newspapers, et al) as well. The formats of all other media changed as the popularity of television grew.

Television's evolutionary impact on other media:

Print media had to become more visual in photographic design, while the text had to elucidate in greater detail what had been given cursory immediate coverage on television the night before.

Radio changed as well, going from directing its attention to a generalized appeal (broadcasting) to more specialized formats (narrowcasting) honing in on targeted demographics.

Continual evolution:

Considering television remains an infant compared to its elders in the print media and radio, further

maturation will create additional changes in all forms of mass communication. The most recent exemplar of this phenomenon is found in the emergence of twenty-four hour cable news services. As cable penetration expands, network news will of necessity change.

Thus, the changing of the medium will result in a change of the medium's language and consequently audience perception will not remain the same. Therefore, the perception of audience's medium literate with future telecasts will have a different world perception. It should be noted that an infant has tremendous growth ahead.

It is the responsibility of those in the television medium to assure that this growth is directed in such a manner that the greatest potential can be realized from such a powerful channel of communication.

How to successfully achieve this elusive "greatest degree of potentiality" is an ongoing topic of polemics for communication scholars, industry executives, governmental agency administrators, and others. The issues, as explicated by some of these individuals, will be discussed later in this paper.

Television news and newspaper news: a comparison:

At the present status of development three noteworthy differences exist between television news and newspaper accounts.[20] First, newspaper stories are designed to provide all pertinent information (who, what, when, where,

why, and how) in the lead paragraph. To allow flexibility in editing, a story can be cut at any point because content is given in an order beginning with the most important facts and continuing to the least important. Television news is holistic in that its video segments are constructed with a continual theme which doesn't allow for editing of the finished product.

Second, newspaper reports are presented in a very impersonal manner. No reference is made of the reporter other than a byline at the top of the story. Television news is built around personalities. The reporter appears on camera, in front of the White House, personally explaining the details to his/her audience, in the form of a one-to-one communication.

Third, because of the nature of the medium, present day television is more pretentious in coverage than newspaper. Video oriented reporters are constantly preoccupied with what "looks good" on camera. Action shots are the pursuits of some television journalists who even risk death in some instances to get the shot they desire.

<u>The entertainment factor:</u>

Robert Stam observes that viewing television news is a pleasurable experience even when the news is bad.[21] The reason, he contends, can be traced to the fact that news is "inflected by fiction." He insists the networks confirm his hypothesis by promising, "tonight's

top stories", not "tonight's top facts". Like good narrative, each acceptable news story contains rising and falling action, a beginning, a middle, and an ending.

People are entertained by stories, even those based on actual occurences having taken place the same day. This is merely a carryover from classical orators who drew analogies with which their audiences could relate.

Back to the future in media use:

History does tend to repeat itself to those insightful enough to acknowledge it. Such was the case in the rediscovery of radio.

The Reagan White House staff devised a system for successfully setting news agenda through interaction of the various media. This was accomplished through the medium most commonly overlooked by current administrations as a mere secondary channel of communication, radio.

The logic behind the weekly presidential radio address was to present the media with "Reagan as Reagan" through an unfiltered (i. e. no reporters) delivery of ideas directly to his constituency, the American public. With saturday being a traditionally slow news day subsequent television coverage would expand on the president's message as would sunday's expanded newspapers. The absence of reporters would allow

the president to speak on topics he deemed apropos.[22] In fact he could even be "homey" in his presentation.

The rediscovery of radio by a television era president proved successful. A study by Cornell University indicates both sunday newspapers and network newscasts covered the radio addresses with regularity in prominent places in their papers and newscasts. The study further revealed that response from the opposition party did not receive substantial coverage as the presidential speeches, but set a precedence in allowing such opinions to be expressed in a national forum.[23]

Therefore this rediscovery of an old medium lead to new uses for the other media in terms of strategic media planning. Political media advisors prior to this avant-guard approach simply directed most of their strategy to television coverage.

Both broadcast media (radio and television) possess the strength of spontaneity. Critics and promoters of television journalism agree that this is where television is most beneficial, in emergency situations (e. g. presidential assination attempts, weather related disasters, et al).[24]

In such settings the most efficient method of disseminating information to the public is through television. The language of the medium graphically elucidates a scene that isn't possible with either radio or the various print media. In print a sentence imposes syntactical structure for the reader to decode, while in video the message is decoded as a result of a series of electronic processes.[25]

The role of print journalism in such situations is to supply expository details with consequent reactions and followup. The initial story has already been elaborated upon by the radio and television media, and a news hungry public is eager to consume followup details which at the time of the original occurence of the event were not in the minds of the viewers. Thus the newspaper journalist must plan ahead and obtain such information while on the scene of an emergency situation.

Media perspectives:

This means while broadcast and print journalists are both on the scene of such an event, different information is being analyzed and synthesized. The broadcaster is seeking the immediate details, while the print journalist is thinking in terms of acquiring more expository material that will benefit readers the next day.

Viewers continue to become more astute in perception as familiarity with the medium progresses. Some political campaign planners have not acknowledged such sophistication among audience members and have failed their clients by airing commercials that were non-persuasive due to lack of authenticity in content.

Tubbs suggests implicit persuasion is more effective than explicit confrontation in some settings.[26] Factors such as audience educational level and

previous committment on the issue (s) being discussed have a bearing on which method of persuasion is most effective. Tubb's research indicated strong prior attitudes will render responses receptive to messages with which the audience agrees and repellent to issues with which they oppose. Explicit messages are most effective with intelligent audiences, while implicit communications are more congenial to less intelligent subjects.

This implicit form of persuasion is easily adaptable to television broadcasting, which is empirically known as a hidden persuader. The images in the storytelling process are as important as the narrative description and in some situations, the pictures are even more important than the script in conveying the message.

Ineffective political advertising:

Television, being a visual medium is given to implicit interpretation of images. An example of where political advertisers neglected to consider this aspect of the medium's language is exemplified in a study by Garramone.[27] She discovered sponsor and rebuttal advertising was not perceived as effective as independent sponsorship.

Surprisingly the trustworthy factor was not influenced by the original sponsor nor rebuttal variables. Another result of the report demonstrated

that a backlash effect was felt by the rebuttal advertiser. The audience indicating that rather than refuting the claims alleged by the original sponsor, their perception was that the second candidate merely ignored the claims and attacked the personality.

While much research, such as the Garramone study focused on the cognitive implications of television viewing, other scholars assert that study should additionally be focused on affective factors.[28] This is in light of findings showing a direct relationship between heavy television viewing and desire for advertised products on children's programs.

Because of the persuasiveness of this pervasive medium most other countries have more strigent regulations governing the use of broadcast facilities than the United States.[29] The prevailing mood in Washington is for a continuance of deregulation policies with the public being the primary discerner of what is or is not acceptable rather than a governmental agency.

This independent outlook finds its foundation in the American psyche. This laissez faire spirit is finding a resurgence particularly in the field of mass communication.

Government and mass communication:

The print media have always enjoyed basic freedoms, to the extent that the nation's founders

stipulated such in this country's earliest documents. Broadcast regulations were a reluctant necessity. Enacted because airwaves (frequencies) are limited, debate has continued from the beginning of this century as to just what constitutes legislation in the public's interest. The delicate balancing act is between ultimate freedom of expression, on one hand, and allocation and supervision of limited air space on the other.

This debate has taken on additional considerations in the wake of new technological developments. Television continues to segment its audience as more specialized cable networks and low power television stations become available. Some allege that technology has advanced at a much more accelerated rate than has legislation.

Because television influences society in a "domino effect" manner, preliminary hearings normally call for representatives from a wide gamut of the American populace. This process is sometimes an impediment to enacting new legislation, but a vital way of assuring all opinions have been voiced on a given subject.

A centralized research proposed:

Scholars and communication researchers remain divided over whether a centralized research clearinghouse would better come to gripes with the

influential factors of mass media than independent research at various institutions, as is the present case.[30]

Such an agency would focus on five aspects of media research. First, scholars from a myriad of disciplines would be involved, considering the diversity of the inquiry. Included would be; psychologists, journalists, economists, lawyers, political scientists, media specialists, et al.

Second, the agency could serve as a means of making available current opinion survey data. Third, research borrowed from other agencies would be accessible through a central clearinghouse.

The fourth function of such an agency would be to enhance future heuristic endeavors. Scholars and industry representatives could confer on pertinent issues for a fellowship year in a setting conducive to concentrated thought.

Fifth, an evaluation committee could serve as a buffer between practicioners in industry and esoterical researchers in academe.

The sixth function is closely related to number four. The research generated by this proposed centralized agency would be heuristic in evoking additional inquiry from scholars in other institutions. Therefore more research would be produced both within and outside the proposed agency.

And the seventh function would be to establish a precedence setting commission that would study social problems that heretofore were unaddressed.

Critics of such a centralized agency express skepticism that although such altruistic objectives as posited sound good, as articulated, that in practice such an agency would ultimately evolve into another bureaucracy.

Conclusion:

The diatribe over the television medium's purported impact has endured since the influence of this communication source first began to make significant impressions on public opinion. Because the medium is so young compared to its elders in other media, an open door exists for study at all levels and across all disciplines affected, which is virtually all inclusive.

Heretofore much of the questioning has centered on the effects of advertising or the role models portrayed in fictive television. More recent research efforts are beginning to focus on the misguided perceptions emitted by factual television accounts of real events. This previously lacking area of research should be the focus of much more study.

Research should focus on short term and long term implications of a steady diet of television consumption. Also factors concerning media literacy should be investigated.

In order to achieve this, researchers must continue to be aware of technological advances that

are changing the "language" of the medium every few years. As more specialized cable networks come available, the language of the medium will be altered to emphasize areas of interest to a select audience rather than a mass conglomerate.

Research methodologies must evolve in conjunction with changes in the medium's language. At present methods employed by researchers cited in this paper are sufficient.

The public will ultimately benefit from such scholarly endeavors as television, as any tool, is utilized in more productive ways. Thus, the "vast wasteland" presents an opportune situation for irrigation, fertilization, and growth whereby society may finally come to realize the medium can be used as a source for good rather than an idle toy or even toy idol.

Notes

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